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Writing Sample

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Includes "We Danced That Winter."

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We Danced That Winter

Like all the past years, November of 1978 had already manifested the chilliness of early winter. In my memory, however, that year was splendid and brilliant, shimmering with the dizziness one feels after a dance---the dizziness of ecstasy, the dizziness of vomiting. Happiness was accompanied by sadness, dispersing like elusive smoke. In my mind as it matured, those days seem frivolous but unforgettable.

One night my mother and I were invited to attend a dance party by one of her friends, Uncle Jiu (or maybe Uncle Qiu, for in Shanghai dialect, 'Jiu' and 'Qiu' are pronounced the same way). Oh, a dance party! Even hearing that phrase I felt a ripple in my stomach. On the way, I walked so quickly that I had to wait at the street corner for my mother and Uncle Jiu to catch up.

The streets were more crowded than they had been in the past few years. It had been said that millions of Zhi Qing¹ had returned to the city. They were back, facing now the problems of no work and no house. I felt sorry for their difficult situation, while feeling happier about my own luck. After graduating from middle school, I had been assigned to work on a farm. During that time I often made up excuses to go back home; there, under my mother's supervision, I reviewed English, mathematics, physics, and chemistry, preparing to leap away from the farm---(into?) the ocean of hardness.

As it turned out, this was the year that the college entrance examination system was re-established. I took the exam in June, and was admitted to the college in October, as expected. What I meant was that I traded in the easy life of the new era against two years of shameful escapes from hard work at the farm. I should have been grateful to mother for her foresight about my future. This, however, was not the case. I disliked her pretended vigor in the presence of Uncle Jiu. This shortcoming, cannot be said to have been an obstacle to my feeling of joy, however. It occurred to me that in my twenty years of life, this walk to the dance was the ultimate experience.

That night was the first night I heard a stereo, with music playing there in a decrepit dance hall. Profuse and magnificent, it was just what I expected music to be. Somehow I felt a little nervous; my cheeks were numb. The music stole through my clothes to breeze my skin, making every hair shoot up and quiver.

Music sets were played one after another, yet the dance floor remained empty. I could imagine people's fear in the face of that emptiness. Then at last, some courageous dancers appeared. They walked onto the dancing floor in twos and threes, and took up a pose for a dance---to be danced only with members of their own sex, which they did self-consciously. Their steps were awkward; some dancers even stumbled and fell. Standing at the edge of the floor, I too almost fell. Just being among these people could make you dizzy. Then suddenly a man and a woman entered the floor. The man held his partner's waist with his left hand, her hand in his right. The spectacle produced an uproar in the crowd. Embraced by the dazzling light, everybody was as exhilarated as I was. This was the first time I ever saw a man and a woman's body so close in public. On the

¹ Young people who had gone to the countryside after the graduation from middle school during the Cultural Revolution.

man's face was an expression of suffering.. He held his partner tightly, trying to dance to the music's rhythm. When at last they swirled, the audience applauded. I was bewildered. My heart began to beat fast. My eyes and mouth were wide-open. I must have looked like a fool. At this very moment a strong feeling came to me: new times are coming.

Mother was so near me that I could hear her heavy breathing and see her red cheeks. Unconsciously, her white, delicate fingers caressed her face . Her reaction upset me. I could tell that now every cell in her body wanted to dance along with the music. She had been crazy for dancing, had received the title dance queen while a student at the university. For years these dances were the only thing mother thought worth of recalling. In other words, this was her only way to re-enter her vanished youth. For my father, a man who always wore Chinese tunic suits and worked in another province, these dances and their memories were of no use. Mother still liked dressing up, even in her middle age. That night she wore a brown coat over a satin cotton-padded jacket; with her hair curled, she looked like a lady in an old picture. Having grown up in revolutionary times, my aesthetic view differed sharply from my mother's; our tastes were always clashing. Yet tonight I found her clothes quite suited to the party atmosphere. An thought dawned on me: mother had at last succeeded in waiting out a day when the old clothes at the bottom of her suitcase could be brought out and put on again, for all their smell of camphor.

Standing next to us, Uncle Jiu was wearing an old, long, western-style coat with stiff shoulders and narrow sleeves. His hair was neatly combed into the style of 3 to 7. The glasses added an extravagant air to his appearance. In my eyes, he was a good match for my mother. Or, in a phrase typical of the times, they were birds of a feather.

"Look, look," remarked Uncle Jiu to my mother in Shanghai dialect with a Suzhou accent, "these fellows aren't dancing. They are actually dragging the rickshaw. Steps slow, body rigid." Now more and more people had crowded onto the dancing floor and this critical remark upset me.. I was just as envious of the dancers as were all the people around me. So what if the pose was not pretty? What mattered was that you swirled with the music. Born too late by some twenty years, I had had little chance to watch this sort of dancing; it had lived only in mother's memory and in the old black and white movies, themselves severely criticized for ten years now. Mother had thought that the time for dancing had gone forever. Imagine it coming back again!

Yes, you should dance. But then you found that your legs and your waist were not under the control of your will. They had turned into things that revolted. In the following days, as I strained to practiced my dancing, my body humbled me.

That night when the music floated to us from afar, mother came to, realizing I was by her side. "Daughter, this is just an easy four-step dance. There is no need for you to learn before you can try. Just let your Uncle Jiu lead you." I refused, struggling to escape from them, my face red--an altogether inappropriate behavior. Barely able to control myself amidst the sentimental music, I wanted to cry.

Then mother and Uncle Jiu entered the dance floor together, her left hand on his shoulder, her right hand raised high. This was the first time that I saw mother dance, and I had to admit their dancing was graceful. It seemed as if their legs were controlled by the same nerve, rising and falling in along the same line, as if on a skating rink.. Then another piece of music was played, and mother and Uncle Jiu danced again. They swirled along the edge of the floor, in a series of dizzying circles. The audience turned silent. The other dancers drew back to watch them. The classic dancing filled them with awe.

Uncle Jiu's shoulders were balanced. This shabby man, wearing the same coat for dozens of years, suddenly seemed elegant. Mother had already taken off her overcoat. Under the cotton-padded jacket glimpsed the silhouette of her once-slender figure, now helped out by the grace of her dancing. Compared to her, I looked too strong and too tall. Being young was here a disadvantage. The times--- the rough and hard times, were left behind as mother and Uncle Jiu danced.

After that night, mother and I went dancing at Uncle Jiu's home every weekend. We lived on the same street. As soon as night fell, the impatient Uncle Jiu would ask his wife Aihua to call us over, even before the other guests arrived. Dozens of years ago the Jius' had been classmates of my mother. But I had little impression of them until I became an adult, as if they only suddenly entered my life.

Uncle Jiu had owned two stories of a western-styled three-story building in the West District of Shanghai. That is to say, three members of his family owned four rooms altogether. But such property qualified him among the wealthy. The Culture Revolution, meanwhile, made him penniless. Even so, Uncle Jiu kept some of his former life style : in his house there were cotton bedcovers, tablecloths with embroidery and cut-outs, and yellowed black and-white photos hanging on the wall of Uncle Jiu in an evening suit and Aihua in white. In a word, the atmosphere at Uncle Jiu's home was a contrast to that of the revolutionary times. And the hedonism permeating it was quite attractive to such people as my mother.

In fact, the whole building had once belonged to Uncle Jiu, but during the Cultural Revolution the ground floor and the third floor were taken away from him. A year ago when people living on the third floor moved out, it was closed up and now stood empty. Uncle Jiu seemed to have gotten accustomed to the simple life in a small flat. The bigger room facing south was the old couple's bedroom, and the hallway facing north was for the son, now in middle school, for studying and sleeping. Uncle Jiu had not figured out what to do with the empty space on the third floor. After all, had no money to furnish it. This was Uncle Jiu's worry.

Now things were changing. Uncle Jiu regained his high spirits. On weekend nights, his home was noisy with dancing. Those who had not danced their fill at the hall earlier that night crowded into Uncle Jiu's house to go on with the dancing. They wished the party would never end. Once again Uncle Jiu's life shone with what is called hope. The empty flat on the third floor would now be used for parties at which a dozen dancers could have room to dance slowly. Uncle Jiu was fifty-two that year.

When I now recall the past, I see those weekends brought me more worries than happiness. On Saturday afternoons, I'd hurry home from college, busying myself with bathing, hairdressing, and ironing the dress for the party. In fact I had only a few pieces of clothes, none of them suitable for a dance party. Over the cotton jersey I'd put a woolen sweater, a cotton-padded jacket, then a blue overcoat. As for the trousers, I only had one pair, loose and made of corduroy. This was the common outfit if you didn't want to be singled out. During the winter, people in Shanghai appeared clumsy and childish, like the farmers on the Chinese lunar New Year pictures. Such clothes could protect you from both political troubles and the humid Shanghai winds. Then the dance parties started. The most important thing for every woman there was to change clothes. Under the knee-length coat they would wear bright-colored and tight-fitting sweaters, skirts, and high-heel shoes. It seemed that Modern Beauties re-appeared in Shanghai overnight.

Too bad for me that everything was changing too quickly. I had just returned to Shanghai to study, and had to depend on my parents for a living. I had no money to follow fashion. And I had outgrown the delicately cut clothes that used to belong to my mother. Rather than enjoying the happy life, I was frustrated.

I had other reasons to complain to mother. On Saturday afternoons, our room would become a store overrun with clothes from the camphor trunk. Clothes were spread on the bed, the floor, the table, and the chair. Mother wore plastic hair-curlers on her newly-washed hair, and stood in front of the mirror matching up the different garments. For a child spending full days at school six days a week, there should have been a considerate mother, paying attention to every detail of her life. But the first sentence I would hear from Mother was, "Hurry up and wash, daughter. There is a party at Uncle Jiu's tonight."

I gave way to my anger, yelling at her, "I am not going to the party." She had forgotten her responsibility as a mother since the dance parties have started..

"Then I should leave you alone?," mother raised her eyebrow. Mother never fussed about me, so I began to get worried. Bleary-eyed, I was at a loss what to do.

"I don't have any nice clothes to wear".

"I have none either. All women say they have nothing to wear. It was because of the times we were born into," mother's voice rose into anger and she continued, "I have wasted my youth away, daughter. But you are young. You will have lots of chances to wear beautiful clothes. I'm already forty-seven, I'm getting old." Mother took a mouthful of water from the cup and sprayed it onto the clothes on the ironing board. The water scattered like mist. Then she took the blazing iron from the stove and put it down on the damp cloth, releasing a little noise, a puff of milky-white vapor and a whiff of burnt smell into the air. The wrinkled clothes were being ironed out along with her grievances. Thinking of her radiant face and graceful posture at the party, I found it hard to accept the cruel comparison in life.

At dusk, when Aihua came to fetch us, my heart leaped again. Music hovered in my ears. The lovely waltz was another peak in my life which I couldn't wait to climb. Like

mother, I was not going to give up any opportunity of attending the party. I was as vain as she was.. The only difference was that I saw Uncle Jiu's house as practicing ground where I could perfect my dancing. For I imagined that some day I would show myself off at a grand party, just as my mother had in her youth. But I refused Aihua's invitation at first so as to disappoint mother, excusing myself with too much homework and simply no time. Then Aihua grabbed my hand and said to mother, "Jiu would be displeased if your daughter wouldn't attend."

"It's not because of the homework, it's because of the clothes," mother was rather frank. She thinks her clothes are out of fashion."

I got angry hearing her words, but Aihua smiled: "You would look beautiful in anything at all at your age. Nothing is better than youth."

"That is what I told her too.. But she won't understand that until she is as old as we are." Mother had already put on her high-heel shoes. She never really worried that I would not come along. So I let Aihua lead me out of the room, thinking her a better mother.
